“Like a Rainbow in the Dark:” The Experiences of Metallectuals in Higher Education

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Abstract

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the experiences of *metallectuals* in higher education—college students who belong to the heavy metal subculture. Utilizing intersectionality and social reproduction theories, the results suggest metallectuals encounter alienation and marginalization at the intersections of their social class, gender, race, and subcultural affiliation.

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When investigating the genesis of inequalities between different college student populations, it is important to consider the unique challenges encountered by students that may compromise their success in higher education. For instance, students who experience a sense of alienation brought on by marginalization are often more at-risk of non-degree completion compared to their peers, primarily because these students may lack a strong sense of belonging in higher education (Strayhorn, 2012). Over the decades, scholars have turned their attention toward better understanding the experiences of subpopulations of students, with special attention given to discovering the factors that may exacerbate students' feelings of isolation or marginalization. As a result of this research, scholars and practitioners are now better-informed about the experiences of students of color; gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, genderqueer, or questioning students; low-income or working-class students; first-generation students; transfer students, students from immigrant backgrounds; international students; and other underrepresented student populations who may experience significant challenges feeling an authentic sense of place in the academy.

While research on some subpopulations of college students has expanded over time, one particularly under-researched group in higher education includes students who belong to the heavy metal music subculture—a subculture of individuals who often face "unabashed prejudice" with regard to their cultural and musical interests and, thus, may also face potential marginalization in higher education (Walser, 1993, p. 20). While researchers have drawn their attention toward students from other musical subcultures, such as hip-hop and rap (Petchauer, 2010; Stovall, 2006; Wessel & Wallaert, 2011), little is presently known about the lived experiences of *metallectuals* in higher education—college students who self-identify as

belonging to the heavy metal music subculture, also known as "metalheads." The purpose of this phenomenological study was therefore to explore the experiences of metallectuals in higher education. Framed by intersectionality theory and social reproduction theory, I also sought to examine metallectuals' experiences as they occur within the unique intersections of students' gender, social class, race, and other social identities.

College Students' Subcultural Affiliations

There is much evidence to support the salience of subcultural identity groups in framing several aspects of students' experiences in higher education (Clark & Trow, 1966; Gottleib & Hodgkins, 1963; Harper & Quaye, 2007; Horowitz, 1987; Kees & McDougall, 1971; Kuh, 2001-2002; Magolda & Ebben, 2007; Pace, 1964; Petchauer, 2010; Rhoads, 1997; Terenzini & Pascarella, 1977; Wessel & Wallaert, 2011). These subcultures denote smaller groups whose members share norms, cultural signifiers, attitudes, and values that differ from those of other groups (Kuh, 2001-2002; Wessel & Wallaert, 2011). The subcultural ties or affinities may enhance students' sense of belonging or membership to a group within the larger cultural context of higher education institutions.

Recent scholarship about college students' affinities with subcultures has focused on students' musical influences and interests. Most predominantly, research on college students' affinities with hip-hop culture and rap music has emerged in scholarship published within the last decade (Evelyn, 2000; Hikes, 2004; Iwamoto, Creswell, & Caldwell, 2007; Petchauer, 2009, 2010; Roach, 2004; Stewart, 2004; Stovall, 2006; Wessel & Wallaert, 2011). Scholars have critiqued the dominant popular cultural discourse surrounding hip-hop culture and rap music that suggests the "glorification of the 'thug life' and its perpetual cycle of violence" (Hikes, 2004, p. 40). Several scholars have also documented attempts to regulate rap and hip-hop music's so-

called proliferation of lawless and obscene lyrics that promoted violence, sexuality, and misogyny (Bayles, 1994; Biner, 1993; Lynxwiler & DeCorte, 1995). In spite of the negative perceptions of rap and hip-hop subcultures predominant in popular culture, the overarching narratives developed by higher education researchers have suggested positive benefits are associated with college students' affiliation with hip-hop culture—findings that run counter to mainstream discourse that suggests the undesirable themes in rap and hip-hop have negative effects on students, particularly African American males (Evelyn, 2000; Hikes, 2004; Petchauer, 2010; Roach, 2004; Stewart, 2004). Research suggests subcultural affiliation in rap and hip-hop subcultures positively promotes college students' academic goals and learning (Petchauer, 2010; Wessel & Wallaert, 2011); cultural appreciation (Wessel & Wallaert, 2011); and social support, sense of belongingness, satisfaction, and persistence within higher education (Kuh, 2001-2002; Wessel & Wallaert, 2011).

Yet, despite the advances in research documenting the benefits of college students' subcultural affiliation with rap and hip-hop, there remains a significant lack of research regarding the potential benefits of students' association in a subculture that carries parallel negative public perceptions: the heavy metal music subculture. Akin to rap music and hip-hop, the heavy metal music subculture has been historically vilified in popular culture as overtly violent and sexually explicit. Rap, hip-hop, and heavy metal music subcultures share communalities of counter-cultural ideals, normative violations, and marginalized statuses in society (Fried, 2003; Lynxwiler & Gay, 2000; Markson, 1990; Walser, 1993; Weinstein, 2000). Like opponents of rap music, heavy metal music detractors such as the Parents Music Resource Center (Gore, 1987) portrayed metal music as dangerous to youth because it glorified drug use, endorsed sexist and pornographic values, caused violent and reckless behavior, and generally advocated anti-social

attitudes and behaviors (i.e., through its occult and Satanic themes) (Markson, 1990). It is significant that several researchers have studied social attitudes toward rap music and heavy metal in tandem (Ballard & Coates, 1995; Bryson, 1996; Fried, 2003; Lynxwiler & Gay, 2000), mainly due to the genres' communalities of counter-cultural ideals, normative violations, and marginalized status in society.

While rap or hip-hop cultural affiliation has been primarily studied among students of color (Evelyn, 2000), the heavy metal subculture is mostly comprised of White males (Weinstein, 2000). Therefore, White metallectuals may benefit from their racial privilege while enrolled in higher education—a factor that could counter the potential alienation experienced by students of color who belong to rap or hip-hop subcultures. Furthermore, the metal subculture is traditionally dominated by working-class men (Weinstein, 2000), a group generally under-researched in higher education, under-represented in four-year institutions, and susceptible to higher rates of disengagement and early attrition (MacLeod, 2009). There are several reasons for these disparities at the intersection of gender and social class; for instance, working-class men often develop a hyper-masculinized and labor-focused identity to combat the emasculation they feel in not having power and privilege in society—an identity that lies in opposition to higher education, which working-class men reject because education is framed as too effeminate (Barker, 2005; Morris, 2005). While White men generally carry significant power and privilege in society, White working-class men are oppressed given their lower social class status and therefore more openly resist the traditional pathways to the middle class that they feel socially and culturally exclude them (Archer, Pratt, & Phillips, 2001).

Working-class heavy metal women may experience an easier transition to higher education and higher graduation rates than their male counterparts given their often-majority

enrollment status in colleges and universities (King, 2006); however, women belonging to the metal subculture are often viewed as outsiders within the subculture and experience significant challenges at the intersections of their identities as well (Walser, 1993). Furthermore, working-class women in higher education also struggle with full acceptance in the academy given their social class upbringing and expected conformity to gender roles (e.g., caretakers) (Reay, 1997; Tokarczyk & Fay, 1993). So, even as women are achieving parity in some academic fields—and surpassing men in degree completion rates in those areas—within the heavy metal and working-class subcultures, women are alienated, subjugated, and oppressed based upon their gender (Weinstein, 2000).

The purpose of the present research study was to investigate the lived experiences of current and former college students who belong to the heavy metal subculture. This study is significant to the field of higher education for a few reasons. First, because the metal subculture is dominated by men—and particularly working-class men (Walser, 1993; Weinstein, 2000)—studies about heavy metal college students can provide insights into a population that is under-represented in higher education and susceptible to higher rates of disengagement and early attrition (MacLeod, 2009). Feelings of relative estrangement run deep in the heavy metal subculture because its members feel oppressed and marginalized by underlying systems of oppression (Riches, 2011); yet, at present, we do not know if these feelings of estrangement may bleed over into metallectuals' collegiate experiences as well. Students who feel like outsiders are simply not likely to be socially integrated into their institutions and thus face increased risk of non-degree completion (Tinto, 2012); therefore, in exploring the experiences of these students, we may better understand the complexities of students' belongingness in institutions in

the context of their estrangement in larger society—and the consequences of these complexities on students' success.

While gender and social class are important themes to be considered when examining the experiences of metallectuals, this study is also significant because the heavy metal subculture is symbolically excluded and denigrated by elite, high-status culture (Bryson, 1996)—the type of culture predominant in traditional higher education institutions (Hurst, 2010). Metallectuals inhabit a liminal space rife with tensions between expressions of mainstream cultural deviancy and transgressions of symbolic mainstream cultural boundaries—they seek to express themselves as nonconformists while simultaneously conforming to middle-class norms of earning a college education. These tensions may compromise students' full sense of belonging to higher education communities, leading metallectuals to feel alienated within institutions which proclaim openness to diversity yet reject countercultural and anti-authority perspectives. Thus, this study not only advances knowledge about a particular subpopulation of college students who may experience alienation in the academy, it may also shed light on some of the inherent tensions of individuals living in the borders of elite cultural institutions while attempting to maintain their authentic, non-conforming identities. Such themes resonate with the lived experiences of college students from a variety of diverse backgrounds, and exploring how students navigate such spaces can be revealing to researchers and practitioners seeking to alter their institutions to be more accepting of the constellations of unique students inhabiting their environs.

Conceptual Frameworks

I positioned this study through two conceptual frameworks—intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1991) and social reproduction theory (Bourdieu, 1977). Intersectionality theory provides a framework around which to understand the unique interpersonal and social

experiences located at the intersection of multiple identities (Crenshaw, 1991; Museus & Griffin, 2011). Some have suggested that isolating the influence of any one social identity (e.g., gender, race, ethnicity, or social class) masks a deeper understanding of how membership in multiple identity groups can affect how uniquely-positioned college students experience the campus environment, become engaged in colleges and universities, and meet important outcomes (Crenshaw, 1991; Museus & Griffin, 2011). Therefore, while social class as an element of participants' social identities will be explored in this study, it is also important to acknowledge gender, race, level of affiliation, and identity within the metal subculture may bear weight on their experiences.

Social reproduction theory can, in part, provide a framework through which to understand the social and cultural transitions metallectuals encounter as they navigate the middle/upper-class culture of higher education (Hurst, 2010)—especially because the heavy metal music subculture does not embody the same cultural norms and values preferred by elite, upper-class culture and is instead rooted in blue-collar themes, ethos, values, and mythologies (Weinstein, 2000). Cultural preferences for elite or "highbrow" activities perpetuate social distinctions by dominating and alienating outsiders who do not belong to middle/upper-class society (Stuber, 2011). Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) termed this "symbolic violence" (p. 170)—people are "dominated in and through these social distinctions but they may not realize it or they may accept it as natural and fair" (Winkle-Wagner, 2010, p. 15). These cultural preferences are, according to Horvat (2001), accepted without recognition as an exercise of power but are instead viewed as a part of the normal, natural social order. Working-class students often reject these norms by resisting participation in formal educational systems (Archer & Hutchings, 2000; Archer et al., 2001). For those working-class students who do enroll in higher education, persistent feelings of cultural

exclusion, difficulties negotiating their working-class identities of upbringing and middle-class culture of higher education, and other barriers associated with not fitting into the habitus of higher education lead them to be significantly less successful in the pursuit of their degrees (Soria, 2015). According to Jensen (2012), these class-based cultural barriers are "at least as effective in shutting out working-class people as the significant economic barriers to college education" (p. 156).

Methods

Research Approach

I selected a phenomenological research approach for this study in order to capture the lived experiences of "being metal" in higher education. The goals of phenomenological research studies are to explore the central underlining meaning of experiences based on the participants' interpretations of experiences (Moustakas, 1994). The "lived experience" of individuals provides the key components of inquiry in phenomenological studies (Van Manen, 1990, p. 9) and the task of researchers conducting phenomenological studies is to represent the essence or basic structure of individuals' experiences (Merriam, 2009). Prior to engaging in phenomenological interviews with participants, I engaged in a process of reflection to bracket my own experiences as a participant in the metal community, including my biases, perspectives, and assumptions (Merriam, 2009).

I conducted individual interviews with participants and asked them to describe themselves, their metal identity, transitions to higher education, and educational journeys. I asked them broad questions about their experiences in higher education, including what it means for them to be a member of the heavy metal subculture, what it is like to be a person affiliated with the metal subculture in higher education, and whether they experienced any challenges

fitting in with others in college. After conducting interviews, I transcribed and analyzed the data (described in more detail below).

Participants

I engaged in a process of purposeful sampling, which helped me to locate the most "information-rich" cases pertinent to my research study (Patton, 2002, p. 230), by recruiting participants in two primary ways. First, I developed a Facebook page which outlined the purpose of my study. Through this page, I connected with heavy metal student organizations at five universities that had Facebook pages for their student groups. I also joined several heavy metal Facebook pages and posted an announcement about my study on those pages. My second primary means of recruitment was through a popular heavy metal record store—Into the Void Records—which is located in Saint Paul, MN. This sampling strategy reflected a sample of convenience due to its proximity to the researcher, the large population of heavy metal music fans in the region, and the large number of colleges and universities located in the metropolitan area. The owner of the metal record shop posted recruitment flyers in his store and announcements on his store's Facebook website. While I began with purposive sampling in all locations, I also employed chain referral sampling to recruit additional participants who are currently attending college, college graduates, and those who attended college but did not complete their degrees.

Interested participants were encouraged to contact me through email or through my Facebook page. Individuals not located in the immediate metropolitan area received a $10 or $20 amazon.com gift card while those located in the metropolitan area received a $20 gift certificate to the metal record shop. A total of 30 participants were interviewed over the telephone or in person and the interviews ranged in length from 45 minutes to two hours (Appendix A). The

participants included four females and 26 males with an average age of 26 (ranged 18 to 49). Nine of the participants had transferred between different higher education institutions and ten participants had attended community colleges at least one point during their educational journeys (with the majority transferring to four-year colleges). Thirteen participants were college alumni who completed bachelor degrees, four had completed or were currently pursuing graduate school, one alumnus had completed an associate's degree, and the rest were still enrolled in college or community-colleges. The majority of participants (26, or 86.67%) identified as White, one identified as an international student, one identified as Hispanic, one identified as multiracial, and another identified as Native American. Twelve (40%) identified as first-generation college students, 19 identified as working-class, six as middle-class, and five as upper-middle-class. The participants had graduated from or were currently enrolled at 18 different institutions located in 10 states across the United States.

Epoche

I engaged in epoche or bracketing, a process where I attempted to set aside my preconceived notions and knowledge of the phenomena under consideration—that of heavy metal college students or alumni. While I was not active in the heavy metal music scene as a college student myself, today, I am an active member of the local scene and attend local and touring metal shows at least once a week on average. I have befriended many members of the local metal scene, including several individuals who are members of doom metal, prog metal, folk metal, power metal, and black metal bands. I am also an advisor for an emergent heavy metal student organization at my campus. My experiences as a participant in the metal subculture have been mixed; for example, my authenticity as a female within the culture has been questioned by male participants of the subculture (one who even asked me "what are you doing

here?" at a metal show). Those experiences are not uncommon for women in the metal subculture, as females' legitimacy and knowledge is often tested as a means of gauging whether they are mere poseurs or authentic members of the metal community (Krenske & McKay, 2000). My membership in the subculture has also been negatively judged by professional colleagues—one who suggested that I should not list metal shows and band names on my work calendar (which is open to colleagues) because I "have a career to protect," and others who have made negative comments about the metal band shirts I choose to wear to the workplace. I feel tremendous pressure to hide my metal identity in professional contexts. All of these factors bear weight on my interest in the current line of research and influenced my decisions to pursue this particular research project; consequently, I was mindful throughout the process of research design and data collection to avoid influencing the .

Data Analysis

After transcribing the data, I engaged in processes of reduction—returning to the essence of the experience to derive a sense of the inner structure—and horizontalization, a process of laying the data bare and treating the data as having equal weight (Merriam, 2009). During horizontalization, qualities inherent in data are "recognized and described, every perception is granted equal value, non-repetitive constituents of experience are linked thematically, and a full description is derived" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 96). I began by analyzing the most significant statements reflecting individuals' experiences being metal in higher education. After re-reading and reflecting upon those significant statements, I organized the data into clusters or themes with the goal of representing the essence of the phenomenon—the lived experience (Merriam, 2009), in the case of this study, of being a heavy metal college student. I utilized NVivo 10 software (QSR International, 2007) to categorize responses using coding procedures (Creswell, 2007).

I took additional steps to ensure trustworthiness of the qualitative research process. To achieve credibility (internal validity), I relied upon my familiarity with the heavy metal subculture, which helped me to achieve a sense of trust with participants. I engaged in conversations with participants about our musical interests to establish an early rapport and convey a sense of trust. I also shared my findings with participants through member checking. To enhance the credibility of the qualitative data analyses, I used direct quotes to authenticate the findings in the results section (Merriam, 2009). In my analysis, I attempted to provide thick description of the phenomenon under scrutiny and detailed descriptions of the research design and process (Shenton, 2004). Finally, to achieve confirmability, I conducted this study over six months in several different settings and maintained an audit trail of my research processes (Shenton, 2004).

Results

Several themes emerged from the data that elucidate a deeper understanding of heavy metal college students and alumni and the extent to which they wrestle with managing multiple, often conflicting identities and tensions. The first theme described below relates to the complexities of actively resisting and simultaneously conforming to dominant cultures and subcultures. The second describes stereotypes encountered by participants as associated with their metal identity. The third describes participants' experiences in larger society and in higher education, with a focus on their experiences as outsiders on the fringes. The fourth and fifth themes address intersections of participants' metal identities with gender, social class, and race, and the metal community as a place of belonging for participants.

Resistance and Conformity

It was apparent that many metal college students and alumni in this study actively resist affiliation with popular culture while simultaneously seeking conformity to their heavy metal

subculture. Resistance to popular culture was often marked by intentional decisions related to dress, hairstyle, body piercings, or tattoos. When asked to describe their identity, for example, many of the male participants stated that they wore their hair long and had long beards, had tattoos, and mostly wore black t-shirts with metal band logos. The women also wore a lot of black t-shits with band logos and a few also had tattoos. Five participants described their "battle jackets," a black vest or jean jacket full of patches for her favorite metal bands or those they had seen live at a show, and some even wore their battle jackets to the interviews.

Each of these cultural symbols—the long hair, beards, tattoos, metal shirts, and battle jackets—holds significance in the metal subculture; for example, the tattoos reflect a permanent adherence to the subculture, with larger and less concealable tattoos reflecting greater allegiance (Weinstein, 2000). Among men, the long hair is considered a "voluntary stigma" and it is "significant because it cannot be concealed" (Weinstein, 2000, p. 129). As Hallpike (1969) noted, long hair is a "symbol of being in some way outside of society, of having less to do with it, or of being less amenable to social control than the average citizen" (p. 261). Brent vocalized such sentiments by sharing that his primary motivation to grow his hair long was Cesar Augustus: "Cesar ordered that all good legionnaires should shave their hair to show allegiance. So, from there on, I started growing my hair out—sort of the finger—I am not giving allegiance to you sons of bitches." Similarly, long beards are reflective of the counterculture and, like long hair, are signs of dedication to the metal subculture—a "willingly embraced cross to bear" (Weinstin, 2000, p. 129). In some cases the participants were reflexively aware that their appearance choices made them stand apart: for instance, Sam noted that "I always looked weird—I was the only guy with long hair and a beard" in college. Kegan shared that he'd called a "long-haired freak."

The t-shirts and battle jackets similarly reflect allegiance to specific metal bands or subgenres of metal music and they stand as symbols of social status among the metal community (Weinstein, 2009). The battle jackets or vests can quite literally showcase patches that serve as medals of honor for having survived mosh pits with their ritualized, aggressive, and violent thrashing (Riches, 2011); serve as symbols of allegiance to specific bands; or represent badges to denote experiences—such as attending shows with bands that rarely tour or might be more obscure and underground.

Within higher education, these cultural symbols carry additional meaning for students, concomitantly helping students to find others in the subculture and also signifying students' clear non-conformity to the middle-class culture of higher education. For example, several current students and alumni reported that they found fellow metal students—many of whom would become future friends—by wearing band t-shirts or seeing others who were wearing band t-shirts across campus or in classes. While these black metal t-shirts helped students to identify others who belonged in the metal subculture, and also reinforced their own membership in the subculture, many students felt pressured to hide or cover their metal shirts to achieve a more professional look while in college. Students discussed wearing hoodies or sweaters to cover up their metal t-shirts or other aspects of their metal identity like tattoos. Ethan, who earned a master's degree and now works in a middle-class professional position for a University publisher, noted often wearing Iron Maiden t-shirts on "casual Fridays" but noted with pride that he wore his metal shirt "unironically" and with authenticity to the subculture.

Some, but not all, of the students interviewed felt pressure to conform to cultural norms of the middle-class but still struggled because they wanted to retain aspects of their metal identity; for example, Sam, Elijah, and Shane reported that they had recently cut their hair much

shorter to fit into professional environments (whether workplace or in higher education). Sam cut his hair and beard due to pressure he received from his supervisor at work, noting that, "my boss told me, you've got to cut your hair" and that "the worst part of it was that—he literally told me, 'you need to lose your identity.'" Sam described this feeling as, "you know that's what they want you to do, but it's the way he came right out and said it...that was crazy." Similarly, Braden, who is in his late-20s, described sharing with a coworker that he had just gotten paid. His coworker responded by stating, "great, now go get a haircut," a statement Braden described as "not a joke, you know, it was a derogatory thing."

Elijah reported that he had recently cut his hair from really long to very short and found it was easier for him to interact with others; however, the loss of his metal identity, while it opened up opportunities for increased social interactions, compromised a fundamental part of his identity:

> The biggest change for me was when I cut my hair. Previously, when I looked like a metalhead, and I'd be like "I'm into metal" people would be like "yeah, yeah." But now that I look a little preppier for lack of a better word, I'll say I'm into metal to the same kind of people and they'll say, "well, okay, that's interesting!" It takes people by surprise, depending on your appearance, which is unfortunate because it is extremely judgmental. But, up until year when I cut my hair, I felt extremely marginalized as a person, as a metalhead.

There is an extent to which some participants embraced their marginality as further evidence of their non-conformity. Mason, for example, stated "for sure, I have felt like an outsider" and reflected that "90% of my neighborhood wouldn't even know what I'm listening to, or even

understand it, but that's appealing to me. I like the fact that it's not for everybody and I don't care if other people don't like it."

Encounters with Stereotypes

While many participants were proud of their metal identity, they were candidly aware of persistent and pervasive societal stereotypes against those in the metal subculture. According to the participants, these stereotypes included that metalheads abused drugs and alcohol, were delinquents, were overly aggressive, worshipped Satan or held Satanic beliefs, or were unintelligent. Examples of these stereotypes are outlined below.

Keagan identified some of the stereotypes of metalheads as "drunken idiots" or "thick-headed." Everett shared a stereotype that metalheads "drink a lot." "Promiscuity," "stoner, big druggies," "drinking problems," "depression," and "mental health problems" were discussed by a few participants. Mason described an additional stereotype as "smoking dope" and "that you have no morals." Sam described another common stereotype as being "scary" or "intimidating" to others, and Brent shared anti-authoritarian stereotypes, such as "We don't care about authority and law, which has probably got some foundations and truth." Freddie described these stereotypes as being "anarchists" or "rebellious" and even, according to John, "elusive."

Another theme was that participants were aware of stereotypes about metalheads as overly aggressive and violent. John described these as being "angry," while Spencer had heard stereotypes of "meatheads" and "tough guys, don't-give-a-fucks." Several students mentioned "meatheads" as a primary stereotype. Sarah shared that people assumed she was always "aggressive" and "pissed off all the time." Bryan, for instance, shared that listening to metal music had the opposite effect on him—that it relaxed him:

> Before I got into metal, I did have a lot of aggression and it would frequently get into problems taking it out on other people, usually my friends, and it was actually when I started listening to music, that problem dissipated. Because, rather than being something that would incite aggressive behavior, it was actually my outlet, so that it made those physical urges go away completely and I could be at peace by listening to more aggressive music and bliss myself out that way. It is interesting to hear about the knuckle-dragging Neanderthals that go out and beat each other up for fun. That is one stereotype that impacts me specifically.

Katie recalled a moment when she was reading a heavy metal biography in class and a student approached her asking if she was a Satanist. Freddie described "Satan worship" as a stereotype—"I will put out and wear a shirt with a pentagram on it, oh, that must mean he's a Satanist, he loves Satan." Mary discussed telling people she was a metalhead and hearing in response, "oh my god, do you sacrifice goats to Satan?" Slaughtering and sacrificing goats to Satan came up in about a dozen interviews. The Satanic references contradicted many of the current or previous religious backgrounds of students—the majority of the students described growing up in Christian households and attending either private religious K-12 schools or religiously-affiliated universities, although several of those students currently identified as atheists.

The stereotype that most negatively affected participants in higher education was that they were not intelligent—even among the college alumni who had earned or were currently pursuing graduate education. Shane described the stereotypical view that metalheads are "stupid" and that people "underestimate the intelligence of the listeners," even though he believed that metalheads "think and feel things on a very deep level." Similarly, Spencer suggested that, "if

you dig a little bit, there's really a lot of intelligence in the [metal] culture." Brent shared that he "fully promotes that stereotype—I like people to think I'm an idiot—that becomes a weapon you get to use then." Keagan shared that the "mainstream society misunderstands" metalheads as "troglodytes," even though he described the metal community as a "panopoly of different people." Sam noted that the stereotypes of being "neandrathal-like" or that metalheads "can't have sophistication to them" "infuriated" him the most. The stereotype that metalheads were somehow unintelligent was discussed by nearly all of the participants in the study, who felt especially wounded by the stereotype because they were pursuing or had pursued higher education.

Outsiders in Society and Higher Education

One primary theme connected to students' encounters with stereotypes included feeling like outsiders in society and in higher education. Sam perceived that others in society distrusted him, describing that he often noticed that "people watched" him when he went into a store or that people "kept an eye on their kids" when he went out in public spaces. Sam also shared a story about an encounter with a public safety officer, who had been called to investigate a "homeless person attacking an older man"—when in fact, the student was walking home from high school and had simply stopped to chat with an older neighbor. Sam said that, "apparently, with the longer hair and beard, I look like a dangerous homeless person." A month before our interview, Logan wore a Slayer shirt featuring an upside-down cross to a grocery store and an older woman approached him and told him, "you, young man, you are going to hell." Logan said, "I do feel like an outcast in general, big time."

Katie described playing metal music loudly and getting "weird looks" from people. She described the challenges of being a metal fan but "it's also trying to be comfortable with yourself

despite other people being not comfortable with it—with wearing a metal shirt outside without just wearing it in your room....there's nothing wrong with liking this type of music despite other people thinking there is." Spencer described being an outsider to several aspects of the mainstream culture and ways of thinking, like "getting married, having children, paying taxes, and then dying," that seemed to transcend his outsider status as a metalhead.

Some of these themes carried over into students' experiences in higher education as well. For instance, Braden reflected that being a metalhead in college was

> Bittersweet. Sometimes, you know, sometimes being the person that's different is a topic for conversation and you can actually communicate with someone about it. […] I always enjoyed sharing aspects of being metal with people. But, I remember vividly a couple of instances where I would be going between classes and someone would come up to me and say, "what does your shirt say?" I'd tell them, and they'd say something snide…it wasn't a matter of interest for them, it was "you are *different*" and it was more derogatory. […] I was viewed as a degenerate, despite graduating college, having a decent job, and raising a family.

Sarah described challenges in finding friends who shared her mutual heavy metal interests. Elijah noted that "the less I talk about metal, the more I am accepted in the social arena." Logan described his college experience as full of people who were "very unfriendly" to him, saying that he "kept to himself" most of the time. Sam specifically remembered several instances in college in which he was not invited to attend social events:

> There was this long hallway that you'd always have to walk through to get to the parking garage to classes and that's where the fraternities and sororities would hang out and they

would pass out flyers for parties and I always found it funny that I never got handed a single one.

Sam also noted that, "I wouldn't have gone anyway...but I always thought about that, yeah, I didn't get a flyer." Such a statement—a protective mechanism, in part—is deeply reflective of the contradictions of living in the fringes while perhaps yearning for some inclusion in the broader society, seeking acceptance but also rejecting conformity, and reinforcing or justifying isolation from the mainstream culture.

Intersectionality: Gender, Social Class, and Race

The one area in which intersectionality seemed to most readily influence participants' experiences was with regards to their gender, although below I also offer brief analyses of how social class and race were discussed in the interviews as well.

Gender. One intersection of interest was among gender and subcultural affiliation: similar to the men, the women also wore a lot of black t-shits with band logos and a few also had tattoos; however, each woman recounted a moment where her gendered identity was "called out" while attending a heavy metal concert, although the women generally expressed little difficulty in "fitting in" with peers in college. Katie described that her non-metal friends believed her metal attire was "more of a novelty," that it was a charming or harmless aspect of her personality; however, in contrast, many of the men in the study described that others often perceived them as "scary" or "dangerous" due to their attire. So, for women, being metal was perceived as "cute" by outsiders while for men it was "dangerous."

Additionally, most of the women described at some points a betrayal in the metal community that was associated with their gender. For Hannah, this moment came when she "got felt up" at a metal show and it caught her unaware. Additionally, even though Hannah worked at

a metal record store, she noted that male customers often treated her with disrespect, as though she was not an authentic, knowledgeable member of the metal scene. She stated, "I think sometimes guys think, 'oh, she's just a girl, she's here because her boyfriend is here.'" Although she remarked she had a lot of "guy friends" in the metal community, she described that community as a "brotherhood," of which she did not quite belong. Similarly, Mary described the metal community as a "brotherhood" because "metal is so manly, it's so masculine, and there's so many men."

Social class. Some social class themes emerged in the data but were mostly noticeable within participants' academic and career trajectories. Some of the predominant class-based tensions expressed by participants included assumptions about their intelligence (see examples above in the stereotypes theme) and in encountering people's perception that heavy metal was "low brow" music for "stupid" people. Heavy metal music has significant working-class foundations and is rooted in working-class culture: early metal music (e.g., Black Sabbath was birthed out of working-class neighborhoods in England (Harrison, 2010) and, to this day, retains those themes of working-class expressions (Walser, 1993) by acting as a means through which disenfranchised individuals can articulate the frustrations surrounding their structural disadvantage (Phillipov, 2014).

Many participants in this study identified as working-class and were participating in the traditionally more mainstream, middle-class cultures of higher education. They described several encounters with others from the middle-class in which they felt denigrated; for instance, Logan often played his metal music loudly and wore metal shirts to campus and he shared that "girls in yoga pants" would "stare at me in disgust with their mouths open." Matt conveyed that he felt "like a wolf in sheep's clothing" when he had to wear button-up shirts, symbolically a nod to

middle-class professional attire. There seemed to be some resentment toward middle-class expectations for career prospects; for example, Spencer, who was working-class, openly eschewed aspects of the mainstream culture by noting that he decided to pursue a career as a machinist instead of a white-collar profession. Seven of the working-class participants currently had working-class jobs (janitor, machinist, bowling alley attendant, waiter, roofer, and two construction workers), five of whom had earned bachelor degrees.

Although most participants shared that their parents supported their pursuit of higher education, participants who identified as working-class tended not to have the support of friends or family to pursue higher education. For instance, Sarah recalled a moment where her working-class friend told her she was selling out and "buying into the system" by attending college. Matt, Brent, and Kieran were all working-class males, military veterans, non-traditional in terms of their ages, and had all transferred from community colleges to their current four-year institutions. None had received much support from their parents to attend college; according to Brent, his career options after high school included "either going to work for my old man or get a square job, which for me was the Army." The stories were different as compared to middle-class participants, who often conveyed strong familial support and expectations for attending college, graduating on time, and pursuing advanced education; for instance, Hannah, a PhD student, stated that it was "just an expectation that I would go on to graduate school because my mom and dad had multiple degrees."

In our culture, class-based assumptions about intelligence often suggest that those who belong to the working class or who hold working-class occupations or social status have lower intelligence (Rose, 2014)—a factor that likely serves a role in the genesis of the assumptions about the intelligence of the participants in the study. Indeed, several of the working-class

participants discussed actively attempting to dispel those stereotypes about their intelligence; for instance, Shane said people "underestimated my intelligence" and he worked to share with people "how well I read was and how well-educated in terms of current events or historical events." Often, Shane related, "they were quite surprised—people remarked that I blew their perceptions of what they expected of me once they got to know me."

Race. Finally, race-based themes also emerged in the data in ways that suggested some metallectuals were located in liminal spaces between being oppressed because of assumptions about their power/privilege and simultaneously engaging in systems of oppression. When asked to identify his race, Elijah stated his race was "human" and later stated that he possessed a lot of "White pride" but described that he knew it was "un-PC" to express his racial pride others. Ethan also shared that he was aware of aspects of the metal culture that reinforced racism (e.g., modern-day bands affiliated with national socialism) and, as a upper-class professional, he noted actively distancing himself away from those themes and from bands or friends who adhered to those principles.

Participants did not often reference their race in the interviews; however, when the White males referenced race, it was often that they were assumed to be affiliated with national socialism. Bryan shared his experience:

> In high school, there was definitely one student in particular who, this was before I'd grown out my hair, and it was short, and there was one kid who would frequently refer to me as a skinhead and occasionally as a Nazi youth, which I was not very comfortable with. That was also from my personal experience. Just the idea that short hair and scary looking shirts are associated with that ideology, it's unfortunate, but that happens for some people.

Interestingly, although rap, hip-hop, and metal are vilified in society in similar ways, several participants distinguished the goals, themes, and purpose of metal music as unique from those of rap and hip-hop. Brent described metalheads as "*delinquents*, not criminals, not the rappers' thug image, like murderers or drug dealers." Logan suggested that metal was superior to rap music because, "you listen to rap music, you want to go out and rob, rape, and kill people." Elijah noted that,

> If you bring out your interests in metal right off the bat, people will balk at you, which is extremely hypocritical given that a lot of the music other people are into that is really offensive, but people don't bother to read lyrics and don't know. For instance, "Blurred Lines" by Robin Thicke [a rhythm and blues musician]: you read that and tell me that's not condoning sexual assault and marginalizing women in society, and then we'll talk. So, he's not going "grr" [mimicking a metal vocalist's growl] but is his message more positive than "Wolves in the Throne Room" who sing about spiritual connections with nature?

The participants' attempts to distinguish metal music from other genres of music fortified metal themes as more elevated or erudite than other more popular genres—a theme also connected to the social class discussion above. Sam shared, for instance, his father's surprise that a recent album by Carcass had lyrics that utilized precise metal terminology—"these guys are smart enough to know that medical terminology, why does that surprise you so much?" Sam recalled asking his father. Sam's father had a negative cultural evaluation of the metal genre and assumed the metal artists were not intelligent enough to write well-informed lyrics, an example of the symbolic exclusion described by Bourdieu (1984) in which high-status individuals reject cultural forms as vulgar or dishonorable so as to enhance the status of their own cultural

preferences. Yet, while Sam experienced symbolic exclusion from his father in that moment, throughout the interview he also engaged in his own boundary work to elevate the status of metal music; for instance, he shard that "usually good music is underground, it's not what you'll hear in the mainstream." Sam continued by sharing that he owned a t-shirt of a band so obscure that he was probably the only person in his state to own the shirt. Sam was not the only person to convey a sense of elitism in his preference for metal music: several participant's derided popular music heard on the radio as "not real music." Such a stance is *boundary work* (Lamont, 1992)—using social closure processes to signify the lower cultural status of other groups and justify symbolic and social exclusion from others deemed to be of a less-worthy social status (Bryson, 1996). While being oppressed and socially excluded from elite social classes, most metallectuals in the study engaged in the same processes to elevate the status of metalheads and metal music.

Metal as a Community

Despite feeling as though they were outsiders in the mainstream society, there is a sense of connection between metalheads that were described by the participants in the study. Mary noted, for instance, that

> when you meet somebody in the metal community, it's like, yeah! We are automatically friends! ... Let's go to the show! When you fall into the [mosh] pit, I'll pick you up! If somebody starts a fight with you, I've got your back!

Brent also noted that being a part of a metal community meant "falling down in the pit and having someone grab you by the hand and lift you up." This sense of community in the metal scene allows metalheads to become "less reclusive, more extroverted....because they can be more free to be themselves" according to John. Emery shared the metal community as "it's like, Dio's song, 'A Rainbow in the Dark,' like hope when you are feeling alone and rejected." Several

participants mentioned that attending metal shows were akin to attending church services, they were spiritual events in which they felt bonded with others: Troy said metal shows were an "escape" and "made him feel alive." Everett stated that attending shows are like "my church...like you are a part of something, which is where the gratification comes from, going to a place of like-minded people, having a reaffirmation of your beliefs."

There is a sense to which metal, to many participants, was a positive community in which they could be their authentic selves. To Troy, being metal was such a part of his identity that it was "innate." Everett described a "certain comradery among metalheads, they see each other, and they just know" reflecting that "if I walk down the street and see someone with a Gorgoroth shirt, there's like a head nod, there's this connection there, that you don't really get with regular people on the street." Sam shared this as, "it's a connectivity, a closeness with others, having a close relationship with these people, there's a nice feeling of closeness in that."

Discussion and Conclusion

The results of this study suggest there are a few common themes in the lived experiences of metallectuals in higher education. First, participants expressed tensions between expressing themselves as individuals and avoiding conformity; however, membership in a metal community provided them with a sense of support and connection to others who were like them. Additionally, participants expressed encountering a number of stereotypes associated with their metal identity that were highly-negative (or imbued with class-based conceptions about their intelligence). These stereotypes fed into their feelings as outsiders in society and in higher education and, in some ways, participants embraced their isolationism as a badge of their individualism and anti-conformist preferences. Yet, belonging to the metal subculture is, for

many, a way to connect with others who share similar feelings and perspectives as marginalized members of society.

With the knowledge gained from this study, there are a number of steps that higher education practitioners can take to ensure safe spaces for their metal students. For one, practitioners can work to eradicate stereotypes about metalheads and create safe spaces for these students to develop their own communities of belonging. For instance, in conducting my research, I found several universities had established heavy metal student organizations (e.g., the University of Central Florida, University of Maryland) while others actively supported heavy metal student ensembles (e.g., Lawrence University). If no student organizations exist, practitioners are encouraged to develop these spaces for students and to also consider the needs of students from other subcultures who may encounter stereotypes of their own.

Embedded in some of the themes in this study are undertones of class-based systems of oppression and exclusion. The middle-class culture of higher education can be oppressive to students from working-class backgrounds. It is important to become more highly attuned to the ways in which classism operates in campus life because classism is negatively associated with several dimensions of college students' experiences, including their sense of belonging, academic adjustment, and social adjustment (Ostrove, 2007). Social class deeply affects psychological factors and everyday interpersonal interactions (Fiske & Markus, 2012). As such, efforts to disrupt individuals' thinking about—and relationship to—class can be quite challenging; yet, reimagining students' various forms of cultural expression—including their music-based subcultural affiliations—through new lenses is necessary to truly embrace diversity on our college campuses. It is important for higher education practitioners to see metallectuals beyond the stereotypes and learn to value their subcultural affiliation for its many benefits.

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Appendix A

Participants in the Study

Name	*Gender*	*Academic Status*	*Race/Ethnicity*	*Social Class*	*Age*	*Transfer*	*College Location*
Caden	M	Senior	White	Upper-Middle-Class	23	No	WI
Tanner	M	Senior	White	Working-Class	23	Yes	CA
Seth	M	First-Year	White	Working-Class	18	No	FL
Pasha	M	Senior	International	Upper-Middle-Class	22	No	WI
Freddie	M	Junior	Native American	Working-Class	21	No	FL
Katie	F	Sophomore	Hispanic	Working-Class	19	No	FL
Matt	M	Junior	White	Working-Class	26	Yes	MO
Connor	M	Graduate Student	White	Working-Class	22	No	GA
Troy	M	Alumni	White	Working-Class	23	Yes	MD
John	M	Sophomore	White	Upper-Middle-Class	19	No	MD
Maria	F	Senior	White	Upper-Middle-Class	21	No	MD
Sam	M	Alumni	White	Middle-Class	26	Yes	MO
Bryan	M	Alumni	White	Middle-Class	24	No	MN
Hannah	F	Graduate Student	White	Middle-Class	26	No	MN
Braden	M	Alumni	White	Working-Class	27	Yes	MO
Emery	M	Graduate Student	White	Working-Class	29	No	NC
Everett	M	Sophomore (AAS)	White	Working-Class	28	No	MN
Logan	M	Sophomore (AAS)	White	Working-Class	27	No	MN
Kieran	M	Junior	White	Working-Class	34	Yes	MN
Sarah	F	Junior	White	Working-Class	21	No	MN
Nick	M	Junior	Multi-racial	Upper-Middle-Class	22	Yes	MN
Brent	M	Junior	White	Working-Class	39	Yes	MN
Keagan	M	Senior	White	Middle -Class	22	No	MN
Mason	M	Alumni	White	Working-Class	49	No	MN
Elijah	M	Junior	White	Middle-Class	21	No	MN
Liam	M	Alumni	White	Working-Class	42	No	MN
Roderick	M	Alumni	White	Working-Class	26	No	MN
Ethan	M	Alumni (Graduate)	White	Middle-Class	36	No	IL
Shane	M	Alumni (AAS)	White	Working-Class	42	Yes	MN
Spencer	M	Alumni	White	Working-Class	24	No	MT

Note. AAS = Associate of Applied Science, pursuing a community college degree.